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SUBJECT: FOUR-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN

PROGRAM AREA: EARLY CHILDHOOD

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This bulletin was created to assist districts in establishing and maintaining programs for four-year-old children.

RATIONALE FOR FOUR-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN

1. What is the history of four-year-old kindergarten in the Wisconsin Public Schools?

Four-year-old children have been attending public schools in Wisconsin for over 100 years. Wisconsin made a constitutional commitment to early education in 1848 when the State Constitution, Article X, called for school districts to be as uniform as practical and free to all children between the ages of four and 20 years. Essentially all four-year-old children in the community attended the one-room schools of the 19th century. At that time, few teachers had training in instructing young children. In 1856, the first private kindergarten opened in Watertown serving children ages two to five. The first public kindergartens in the state (1873) limited kindergarten enrollment to four- and five-year-olds. These formal kindergartens used teachers with specific training in the education of young children.

Four-year-old kindergarten attendance peaked in the 1920s and then declined as schools shifted their emphasis to five-year-olds. Eventually, kindergarten became a half-day program for five-year-olds with some exceptions. A few districts in the Milwaukee area have maintained four-year-old kindergarten (often termed junior kindergarten) for nearly a century, despite the fact that state funding was suspended between 1957 and 1984. During that time, compensatory programs for educationally disadvantaged and disabled four-year-olds (such as Head Start, Title I, and special education) somewhat filled the void in many communities. In the 1980s, the state legislature renewed state aid for four-year-old kindergarten and expanded state aid for full-day five-year-old kindergarten. Many public schools once again started to look at the concept of universally available four-year-old programming. During the 1990s, more districts saw the need to implement four-year-old kindergarten, and by 2001, over one-third of the school districts operated these programs.

Four-year-old kindergarten funding dramatically came to the forefront during the 2001 state budget deliberations. In September 2001, a budget bill was introduced that would have modified the four-year-old kindergarten count for state aid and allowed districts to claim state aid for children enrolled in full-day four-year-old programs. Serious concerns about the state budget brought on considerable discussion about these funds. The budget that was sent to the governor actually called for elimination of the four-year-old kindergarten membership aid. State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster made investing in four-year-old kindergarten a top budget priority and fought for full funding of the program. Superintendent Burmaster lobbied Governor Scott McCallum for full funding, and the provision was vetoed by the governor, thus retaining current four-year-old kindergarten funding.

2. Why has there been renewed interest in four-year-old kindergarten?

Four-year-old kindergarten is not a new concept, but it is experiencing a resurgence in popularity for several reasons:

- Educators and the public are interested in applying early brain development research and exploring the role schools play in that area.
- As the legislature establishes an education “marketplace” and demands accountability, schools seek ways to improve student performance. Four-year-old kindergarten is one promising way to improve student achievement.
- Awareness is increasing around topics such as readiness, equity, and cost benefits of early learning opportunities.
- The increase in the state share of funding has made it more financially feasible for local districts to fund the program.
- Declining enrollment in some districts has made more space available in school buildings.
- The number of two-wage-earner families has increased dramatically, and parents are seeking increased care for their four-year-old children.
- Parents are looking to their school districts to provide early education opportunities for their four-year-old children.

Based on 2000-01 data, 133 school districts (about 30 percent) operate four-year-old kindergarten serving approximately 13,000 children. Exploration of four-year-old kindergarten is occurring in another one-third of the school districts with the emphasis on community approaches to serving four-year-olds.

3. How does Wisconsin’s four-year-old kindergarten compare with prekindergarten programs in other states?

Wisconsin may be the only state in which the four-year-old program is directly built into the state school aid formula. Two other states, New York and Georgia, offer universal services to four-year-olds, with public schools providing services in a public school or through contract with other community programs, such as child care or Head Start. Several other states (Texas, Illinois, Ohio, South Carolina) have prekindergarten programs that require children to be “at risk” through income or developmental level to enroll in the program. Massachusetts has taken a community-by-community approach with a grant program for communities to link school, child care, and Head Start efforts for four-year-old children. A common factor in all of these states’ efforts is the recognition that public school efforts must be linked with other early childhood programs related to serving four-year-old children.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

4. What approaches are being used as public schools work with other early childhood programs in their communities?

The new approach for universally available four-year-old kindergarten focuses on a school-community interface. It is not just the public schools expanding educational opportunities for four-year-olds and competing with private sector providers. The key to expansion of four-year-old kindergarten is the involvement of a broad range of community early childhood stakeholders.

Successful programs have brought together community leaders representing business, schools, child care, Head Start, parents, recreation, and parent education to explore the issues and develop community-based approaches. They are finding new and innovative approaches that may be school based or community based. An excellent example is occurring in communities where four-year-old kindergartens are located in both elementary schools and licensed child care centers. One approach has school teachers and support staff providing the four-year-old kindergarten program in established community child care centers. In another approach, the school district contracts with established child care centers that have DPI-licensed teachers on staff to provide kindergarten. Other approaches link before- and after-school care to the school-based four-year-old kindergarten or link parents to learning resources when the family elects to keep their child home until five-year-old kindergarten. An article highlighting these efforts in La Crosse, the city that has the most comprehensive community approach to date, can be found in the June 2000 issue of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards publication, *Wisconsin School News*, or on the web at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/bbfcsp/pdf/sandbox.pdf>.

5. How does a district start planning a four-year-old kindergarten program?

Small, rural districts with declining enrollment have relatively straightforward implementation routes, because they may benefit from the additional child count, they have room to house the program, and they may not have a significant private sector providing services to four-year-olds. Larger districts, even if their overall enrollments are declining, will probably not have room for all four-year-old children, and the existing private community providers cannot be ignored. Whereas very small districts can do most of the planning within the district, large districts will need to establish a community-wide, collaborative planning process as a first step towards implementation. As more districts begin planning four-year-old kindergarten programs, a variety of approaches will be developed and the steps necessary for planning will vary.

6. What children are eligible for four-year-old kindergarten?

The only eligibility criterion is based on the child's age. School districts that elect to offer four-year-old kindergarten must make enrollment open to all children who are four years old on or before September 1. There are no ability or income criteria.

Some parents request early admission when their child is born after September 1. School districts have the authority to develop early admission policies and procedures. Early admission policies for four-year-old kindergarten should be coordinated with those for five-year-old kindergarten.

7. When a school district establishes a four-year-old kindergarten program, must they serve all eligible children the first year of the program?

It is recognized that school districts sometimes need to phase in four-year-old kindergarten over several years. They may establish a phase-in plan that uses elementary attendance areas, site-based management, or other methods to determine the first schools in which the program will be available and the year they will be available to all. School districts must be aware that this type of phase-in plan is not popular with parents whose children are excluded. The estimated number of children who will eventually attend four-year-old kindergarten generally can be based on the number of children attending five-year-old kindergarten.

8. What are some examples of parent outreach activity costs eligible for partial reimbursement through the equalization aid?

Parents are partners in the educational process. Outreach activities are designed to support and nurture parents as the primary educators. This provides a fiscal incentive for districts to incorporate parental outreach. While outreach activities must involve direct services to parents, a wide variety of activities may occur. Examples of outreach activities include general communications, home visits, parent meetings at school, parent education classes, parent-child activities, family activity nights, orientation into and out of four-year-old kindergarten, classroom involvement training, family resource center visits, and participation in parent advisory committees. Schools must implement these activities in a manner that is flexible, varied, and sensitive to cultural, racial, and religious differences among families. Activities can take place in the family's home, a school building, or elsewhere in the community.

9. What are the curriculum requirements for four-year-old kindergarten?

Legally, the curriculum requirements are the same for four- and five-year-old kindergarten. Explicitly, four-year-old kindergarten is an early education program and provides more than child "care." However, four-year-olds as a group are very different developmentally from five-year-olds, and using a "watered down" five-year-old kindergarten curriculum for four-year-olds is both inappropriate and ineffective.

As an early education program, instruction in four-year-old kindergarten must address reading and language arts first and foremost but also must include mathematics, social studies, science, health, physical education, art, and music. Obviously, the use of an integrated curriculum, thematic approaches, and learning centers makes tremendous sense, because young children learn by doing, exploring, and experimenting. The required areas (language, math, music, etc.) should be built into the integrated approaches.

Curriculums are locally determined and should be based on best practice. Best practice for children four and five years of age suggests curriculum be developmentally appropriate with children actively engaged in a variety of learning approaches. Again, the required subjects do not need to be taught as separate subjects using a teacher-driven curriculum. The general breakdown of the day should include some direct instruction, a large number of experiential "hands-on" activities, and an opportunity for child-initiated play. (See question 15 for references for several good curriculum resources.)

10. What license must a teacher have?

Teachers in four-year-old kindergarten must hold a kindergarten license (e.g., #090, PK-K; #083, PK-3; #106, K-6, etc.), preferably the early childhood, prekindergarten-grade 3 (#083). With the emphasis on inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education programs, many districts will be interested in teachers who hold dual certification in early childhood regular education and early childhood special education (#808 or #809).

11. What is the suggested teacher-child ratio for four-year-old kindergarten?

There are no state regulations directing the teacher-child ratio for four-year-old kindergarten. Class size is a local control issue and is usually determined by the school board. Some very effective four-year-old kindergartens bring parents, grandparents, high school students, and community volunteers into the classroom, thereby creating an adult-child ratio of 1:6 or 1:7. If a district is only considering teacher-child ratios, they may consider the 1:15 ratio recommended by the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) class size reduction program and early childhood special education inclusion models. When kindergartens are implemented in child care settings, day care licensing requirements of 1:13 will need to be considered when designing the method of implementation.

12. What is the required square footage for four-year-old classrooms?

The Wisconsin Department of Commerce specifies 35 square feet per occupant of open floor space, assuming a self-contained classroom. This measure is specified for safety reasons only and does not suggest this is the optimal room size for educational programming.

13. Must transportation be provided for four-year-old kindergarten?

Transportation must be provided in accordance with the district's overall transportation policies. For example, if transportation is provided for all five-year-old children to attend kindergarten, it must be provided for all four-year-old children to attend kindergarten sessions. With the vast majority of five-year-olds now attending kindergarten for a full day, most districts would prefer not to have a noon bus run. That is one reason coordination and co-location of four-year-old kindergarten with child care make sense.

FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

14. What is the equalization aid funding for four-year-old kindergarten?

Equalization aid for the school district is a major source of funding for four-year-old kindergarten. The law defines the funding requirements. To receive 0.5 in membership aid, a district must operate a program a minimum of 437 hours per year (175 days times 2 ½ hours per day). Of that time, 87.5 hours (20 percent) of the 437 hours may be used for outreach activities for the school staff to link to the child's primary caregivers. Additional outreach hours may be added to the minimum 437 hours to enable the district to receive 0.6 in membership aid. With the additional hours, a district annually must provide at least 87.5 hours of outreach activities in addition to the 437 hours of center-based programming.

15. While equalization aid is a primary source of funding for four-year-old kindergarten, what other funding is used for these new approaches?

Communities are finding ways to bring a wide range of funding streams together to provide new approaches for all four-year-old children and their families. School-based funding sources that may be considered include Title I, special education, and Even Start Family Literacy. Community funding can include, but is not limited to, child care and Head Start. Several examples of blended funding are described below:

- While Title I preschool programs are not considered the same program as kindergarten, Title I funds can supplement other four-year-old kindergarten funding. In Title I “schoolwide” programs, a flexible service delivery approach may be used where funds are pooled to reach goals and objectives. In a Title I “targeted assistance” school, programming options include a Title I-funded teacher in the classroom to team teach or provide assistance to certain children as needed.
- Early childhood special education teachers and related services staff should be part of the four-year-old kindergarten team. Implementation of the child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) in the least-restrictive environment must be the primary purpose. Support and services are designed to assist the child with a disability to access the general education curriculum and are the result of team decision-making between special and general education staff. (See the DPI Information Update 00.09 for more information on serving young children with disabilities in regular education settings.)
- When schools use community-based child care approaches, child care funding (such as child care start-up or quality grants from the Department of Workforce Development/Office of Child Care, Wisconsin Works child care subsidies for parents, and parental tuition) supports the full-day operation of the program.
- Communities may find new approaches through partnerships between four-year-old kindergarten and Head Start that expand the number of hours and services to children and families.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Following is a list of agencies with resources and websites related to guiding principles, standards, curriculum, and other areas:

- Building Blocks to Colorado’s Content Standards. Colorado Department of Education, 201 East Colfax Avenue, Denver, Colorado 80203-1704.
http://www.cde.state.co.us/download/pdf/building_blocks4-26.pdf
- CESA 4 Multiage Web Page and Wisconsin 4-Year-Old Kindergarten Survey.
<http://www.cesa4.k12.wi.us/programs-services/multiage/4ksurvey/index.htm>
- The Creative Curriculum® for Early Childhood. Teaching Strategies, Inc., P.O. Box 42243, Washington, DC., 20015. <http://www.teachingstrategies.com/titles/bookinfo/CCTLGoals.html>
- DPI Early Childhood information on regulations, philosophy, curriculum, guiding principles, and districts with four-year-old kindergarten. <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/bbfcsp/eclrppc.html>

- Early Childhood Education and the Elementary School Principal Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children. National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA, 2231-3843. <http://www.naesp.org> (click on bookstore)
- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, designed to assess programs for children preschool through kindergarten age. <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers/>
- High Scope Curriculum, a wide variety of curriculum materials based on the High Scope philosophy and key experiences. High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 600 North River Street, Ypsilanti, MI 48198-2898. <http://www.highscope.org/>
- Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress. Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 1500 Highway 36 West, Roseville, MN. <http://cfl.state.mn.us/ecfi/EARLYCHI.PDF>
- Position Statement: Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8 (1986, 1988, 1989). National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1509 16th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036-1426. <http://www.naeyc.org/>
- Texas Prekindergarten Curriculum Guidelines. Texas Education Agency, P.O. Box 13817, Austin, Texas, 78711-3817. <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/curriculum/early/prekguide.pdf>
- The Primary Program Growing and Learning in the Heartland. Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Child Development, 301 Centennial Mall South, Lincoln, NE 68509-4987, 402-471-3184, \$25 plus postage. <http://www.nde.state.ne.us/ECH/PRIMARY.HTML>